

This Week in Congress

July 31, 2006

Dear Friend,

Welcome to "This Week in Congress." I hope you find this newsletter useful.

Japan Announces Resumption of U.S. Beef Imports

Once again, the day has finally come. Early Thursday morning, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) confirmed an announcement that Japan will resume imports of U.S. beef from cattle 20 months of age and younger. Beef producers have long awaited this announcement. Japan's resumption of imports of U.S. beef means dollars in the pockets of hard-pressed producers across the country.

Japan closed its market to U.S. beef in December 2003 when a single case of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) was discovered in a Canadian-born dairy cow. Americans never imagined the safety of our beef would still be in question more than three years later. Since that time, USDA aggressively implemented additional safety checks in the beef system to guarantee the safety of American beef. U.S. standards now exceed international beef safety standards. Producers breathed a brief sigh of relief in December 2005 when Japan reinstated U.S. beef imports. Much to our dismay, the door again closed when ineligible veal was discovered in a January shipment from New York.

This has been a long and frustrating process. Japan, like many other countries, looks for reasons to not allow our products, but the persistence of Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns and the constant pressure of Congress left them with little choice but to resume beef trade.

No congressional district in the country has as much to benefit from the resumption of beef trade with Japan as that of the First District of Kansas. Our ranchers produce nearly five billion pounds of beef a year, making it the largest beef producing congressional district in the nation. Japan was the largest importer of U.S. beef prior to the closing of its border in December 2003. I look forward to the day when American beef producers can once again fully benefit from this vital trade relationship.

For more information about my efforts to reopen the Japanese market, [click here](#) .

Iraqi Prime Minister Addresses Congress

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki addressed a joint meeting of Congress this week. In his speech, Maliki expressed gratitude to the American people for their support and sacrifice in the effort to establish a stable democracy in Iraq. He spoke of the Iraqis' resolve to overcome the insurgency and asked that the U.S. continue to stand by them as they work to strengthen their security forces. I appreciated the Prime Minister's comments during this critical time in the Middle East.

House Passes Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Improvement Act

I was pleased to join my colleagues Friday in approving the reauthorization of the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Improvement Act of 2005. This reauthorization will help maintain quality vocational, career and technical education programs throughout Kansas.

The Perkins Act prepares students for postsecondary education through career and technical instruction and provides individuals with the academic and technical skills needed to succeed in a knowledge- and skills-based economy. This legislation supports student achievement in core

academic subjects and emphasizes math and science education that incorporates the use of technology. Vocational, career and technical education help Kansas develop a well-educated and productive workforce to compete successfully in the global economy.

House Passes Legislation to Enhance Health Information Technology System

The House this week passed the Health Information Technology Improvement Act, which is designed to help propel our country into a new health information technology system. Health information technology (HIT) helps update old medical practices by utilizing electronic medical records, clinical decision support software and electronic prescribing technology. Widespread use of these types of technologies holds the promise of saving lives, money and time.

This legislation will provide a national framework for the implementation and widespread dissemination of HIT. It will also provide grants for the use of HIT to coordinate care and to implement technology in small physician practices. Finally, it offers an updated diagnosis coding system for the digital age and provides an expedited process for updating standards. I am always looking for new ideas that can help improve the affordability and accessibility of health care for Kansans. I believe health information technology can be a key element in decreasing health care costs.

House Passes Legislation to Increase Minimum Wage and Better Protect Worker's Retirement Plans

Also this week, the House passed legislation to increase the federal minimum wage from \$5.15 an hour to \$7.25 an hour by 2009. Although an increase in the minimum wage means additional costs for some employers, this legislation also included provisions that will help lower other business costs for small businesses. Also included in this legislation was an increase in the estate tax exemption to five million per individual and 10 million per couple.

The House also passed bipartisan pension legislation that will help better protect the retirement benefits of Kansas workers and retirees. This bill would tighten funding requirements so employers make more cash contributions to their worker pension fund. The legislation also strengthens disclosure requirements to give workers and retirees more information about the status of their retirement plans.

Leading Congressional Discussion about Disaster Assistance for Farmers and Ranchers

This week, I organized a meeting for Members of Congress from seven western states most impacted by the ongoing drought. During our meeting, we discussed how the drought continues to impact farmers and ranchers in our districts and why disaster assistance is needed. I have seen first hand the dire situation many of our producers are facing. One of our first challenges in Congress is informing our more urban colleagues why disaster assistance is needed. The Representatives I met with are committed to taking up this cause, raising the issue with House leadership, and continuing to search for a vehicle with which to deliver effective agriculture

disaster assistance to producers.

Agriculture Committee Concludes Farm Bill Field Hearings

The Agriculture Committee completed its final farm bill field hearing on Monday in Scottsburg, Indiana. I have attended every one of the 11 hearings the Committee has held in various regions of the country to gather feedback from America's farmers and ranchers in preparation for reauthorizing the 2002 Farm Bill. Since the Committee's first hearing in early February, roughly 120 agricultural producers have testified before the Committee. My Subcommittee on General Farm Commodities and Risk Management is continuing to conduct hearings throughout the country, including one today in Wall, South Dakota. A Kansas hearing is planned for the spring of 2007.

In a continuing effort to gather the thoughts of Kansans, comments may be submitted on the [farm bill page](#) of my website.

Agriculture Subcommittee Reviews Conservation Programs

The House Agriculture Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit and Rural Development held a hearing this week in Washington, D.C., to review conservation programs. This is the first in a series of hearings to examine conservation issues to better determine priorities for the House Agriculture Committee as it prepares to reauthorize the conservation title of the 2002 Farm Bill.

The hearing provided me an opportunity to raise issues I have heard from Kansas producers about the administration of our current conservation programs. I also had the chance to question Farm Service Agency officials about its designation of Kansas counties approved for emergency haying and grazing of Conservation Reserve Program acres. Specifically, I asked the officials to address the failure to designate counties that did not meet the rainfall shortage guidelines, but are still experiencing severe drought conditions. Also, I raised concerns about some of the disparities caused by the designation of the expanded emergency haying and grazing areas.

As the next farm bill approaches I believe it is necessary to evaluate these programs to ensure that they are being administered fairly and are resulting in the conservation benefits they were intended to produce. The Subcommittee heard from two panels of witnesses, including representatives from the Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources and Environment department and Farm Service Agency, as well as representatives of the National Association of Conservation Districts, Pheasants Forever, National Association of Wheat Growers and National Cattlemen's Beef Association.

Sponsoring Legislation to Secure Veterans' Information

I sponsored legislation this week to improve the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) management of veterans' personal information. The Veterans Identity and Credit Security Act creates a new VA Under Secretary of Information Services position with greater authority to enforce federal information security standards. Should a breach occur in the future, this legislation also requires the VA to respond quickly and to notify affected veterans and provide them with services including free credit monitoring and insurance against financial loss.

Since the VA reported in May that a computer was stolen containing the personal information of veterans and service members, I have participated in a series of hearings conducted by the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs to question VA officials, industry experts and others about this incident. The goal of these hearings was to understand what went wrong and what needs to be done to make sure it does not happen again. Though the stolen computer was later recovered with the data uncompromised, these hearings exposed that a lack of information management authority and weak information security policies make the VA vulnerable to future breaches. The Veterans Identity and Credit Security Act addresses these shortcomings and works to correct the VA's mismanagement.

This bill was approved last week by the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs and currently awaits action by the full House of Representatives.

Unveiling Leadership Portrait of Former United States Senator Bob Dole

On Tuesday, I joined family, friends and colleagues of former Senator Bob Dole for a ceremony unveiling his portrait, which will hang in the United States Senate. Senator Dole is Kansas's longest-serving Republican leader, representing Kansans for 28 years. The hanging of his portrait in the U.S. Senate is a unique honor. Out of the thousands of men and women who have served our country as U.S. Senators, just over three dozen have portraits on display.

Dan Glickman, former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture and current Chairman and CEO of the Motion Picture Association of America, was in my office this week and attended Senator Dole's event with me. Mr. Glickman represented the Fourth District of Kansas in the U.S. House for nearly 20 years before being appointed as Secretary of Agriculture. While a Representative, he served as a member of the House Agriculture Committee and chairman of the Subcommittee on General Farm Commodities and Risk Management, which I now chair.

In the Office

In the office this week representing Kansas FFA were State President Dalton Henry of Randolph, State Vice President Leann Spinden of Burns, Adviser Jason Larison of Holton and Dr. Bill Hunter of Pratt to advocate for expanded agriculture education in Kansas and to update me on FFA efforts within our state. Janette Lambert and LaTonya Sanders of Kansas City were in with the Environmental Protection Agency to introduce themselves. Heather Ferrell, Director of the Salina Art Center, was in to talk about programs sponsored by the Center and its role in the Salina community. Amber Howard of Great Bend was in with the Congressional Youth Leadership Council to tell me about her educational trip to Washington, D.C.

Members of the Kansas Association of Elementary and Secondary School Principals were in to discuss the No Child Left Behind Act and the testing problems that need to be fixed, as well as the funding needs of Kansas schools. In with the group were Deb Ayers-Geist of Kansas City, Marty Straub of Hays, G.A. Buie of Garnett, Duane Dorshorst of Oberlin and Gene Haydock of Halstead. In with Flint Hills Job Corps were Calvin Shop, Steve Reitan, Sheena Minear and Deondra Collins of Manhattan. Sheena and Deondra are students at Flint Hills Job Corps and talked about how they have benefited from this program. The Flint Hills Job Corps will celebrate its 15th anniversary next month.

Many Kansans were in my office this week for a tour of the United States Capitol, including Cara Baker of Seneca, Tracy Stohs and Susan Ramirez of Marysville, Karen Reeves of Virginia, Matt Brenzikofer of Clay Center, Becky Stueve of Emporia and Crystal Heins of Olpe. Also in were Phil and Rose Larson of Galva with their children, Kate and Kris; Roger and Tricia Koester of Concordia with sons, Gavin and Garet; and Sam Seymore of McPherson with his grandson, Sean.

Several Salina folks were in this week, including Glenn and Jeanne Knak with their children Kevin, Andy and David; Stephen and Karen Young with their children, Rhys, Malia, Elle, Tatum and their exchange student from Japan, Reika Ozeki; Dick and Jane Bradbury with their children, Katelyn, Colleen and Shannon; and Tammy O'Brien with her daughter, Lauren.

Very truly yours,

Jerry